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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- "The trial and conviction of Pastor Abedini represent an outrageous miscarriage of justice and yet one more damning piece of evidence pointing to the rampant denial of religious freedom and the absence of any semblance of rule of law in Iran," said Katrina Lantos Swett, Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Iran's "hanging judge" Judge Pir-Abassi on Sunday, January 27, sentenced Iranian-born American pastor Saeed Abedini to eight years in prison for "threatening the national security of Iran" because of his activity starting in 2000 in the Christian house church movement. Pastor Abedini has been in Iran since July to establish an orphanage.

"The charges against Pastor Abedini were contrived, the process was irregular and deeply flawed, and the conviction flies in the face of both Iranian and international law," said Lantos Swett. "Judge Pir-Abassi has been responsible for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. We call on the Iranian government to immediately release Pastor Abedini. In addition, we call on the U.S. and the international community to raise Pastor Abedini's case in all international fora, including the U.N. Human Rights Council. We reiterate our call for the U.S. government to freeze the assets and deny entry into the U.S. of Judge Pir-Abassi, and other Iranian judges and government officials who have committed violations of religious freedom and related human rights, including the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, who would have had

to approve the Pastor's harsh sentence."

Pastor Abedini was convicted and sentenced four months after he was arrested in September. "Unfortunately, Pastor Abedini's case exemplifies the Iranian government's across the board assault on freedom of religion or belief," said Lantos Swett. "Iran has intensified its persecution of Christians, including lawyers of these victims, such as Mohammed Ali Dadkhah, a prominent human rights defender who was sentenced to 10 years and who most recently defended Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani and some Baha'i prisoners. The Iranian government also has intensified its attacks against Baha'is, with an increased number of arrests and detentions, including young mothers and their small children."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended that Iran be designated a "country of particular concern" or CPC for its systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom. The State Department has designated Iran as a CPC since 1999.

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